

Mian Kamal Din: unusual narrative of Punjab – Part-I

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Published 2014-01-24 07:45:44 in Daily Dawn Lahore

Who was the storyteller? It could be a woman, possibly a mother who in order to cheer up or to put her child to sleep narrated something that looked like a story. We men, who outnumber women as storytellers at present, learnt the art of storytelling from them.

But in the social evolution when patriarchy entrenched itself as an outcome of bio-physical difference, men encountered many a thing that women were not exposed to.

What one encountered in search of a bigger little known world, provided the stuff that became ever renewing source of stories, real and imagined.

How much storytelling is intrinsic to human mind and imagination can be guessed from the fact that almost all the great writers in recorded history have been at some level storytellers irrespective of the genres they wrote in.

In our own literary tradition the greats like Baba Guru Nanak, Damodar, Nijabat, Muqbal, Waris Shah, Pilu, Hafiz Barkhurdar, Hashim Shah, Charag Awan, Qadir Yar, Sachal Sarmast, Shah Mohammad, Mian Mohammad and Maulvi Ghulam Rasul had tales to tell or retell.

Apart from the classical narrative we have an immensely rich tradition of folk storytelling which charts the march of our people; full of sorrows and dreams, signifying a world of reality unrecorded by ‘stuffed men’ called academics.

Mian Kamal Din (1917-2000), a storyteller and a bard, tape-recorded, transcribed and published by Prof Saeed Bhutta in 1990s proved to be a rare find or a serendipity that compelled literary critics with discerning eye to revise their concept of art of folk storytelling.

Mian Kamal, a poor man of ‘Mirasi’ family, at the lower rung of social hierarchy, proved to be what his name says ‘the perfect elder’.

When the first book of his selected stories entitled ‘Kamal Kahani’ came out, it destroyed with a bang the myth of folk storytelling which portrayed it something less than consciously created literary product lacking in high artistic merit.

His art of storytelling in terms of creative skill and socio-historical consciousness puts him in the league of culture conscious Damodar (who was the first to compose the tale of Heer Ranjha) and history conscious Nijabat (who wrote ‘Nijabat Di Vaar’, an epic on Nadir Shah’s invasion of India).

His unobtrusive use of artistic devices and literary techniques coupled with his extraordinary dramatic sense of proportion creates a stunning ambiance laced with joyful noise and ethereal quietude.

He transports you to an entirely different Punjab, the Punjab of lords and peasants, of kings and saints, of wise men and fools, of doughty fighters and cringing cowards.

Nobody before or after him explored the hidden and not-so-hidden dimension of Punjabi life that can do you proud and at the same time make you cry. In his unique expression he can be profuse like Tolstoy and economical like Becket.

Who was this seemingly ordinary mortal gifted with a magician's tongue that conjured an incredible image of hitherto little-known medieval and modern Punjab? Mian Kamal was born in a traditional family of bards in the village of Kot Sultan, in the vicinity of ancient town of Chiniot, close to where Alexander crossed the river Chenab (he has a thrilling story on how incredibly brave Raja Porus faced Alexander).

According to his own account he was a toddler when his father died.

His mother sent him to school instead of getting him employed with the family of his patrons as was the normal practice in such a case. Had that happened, he said, he would not have been what he was.

He did his primary education and then one day when his teacher thrashed him, he decided not to go back to his school.

Poetry and storytelling was what he consciously and subconsciously inherited from his family ethos. He turned to a cleric, Maulvi Munnawar, who imparted him religious education. It was here in the seminary that he started composing poetry.

He was fascinated by the 'Pauri Nawab Muzzafar Khan' (Epic of Muzzafar Khan of Multan) which he learnt to recite from Karam Din Mirasi of Shahpur.

Later, he developed a passion for the 'Nadir di Pauri', the celebrated epic poem of great Nijabat on the king Nadir Shah's invasion of India which devastated Punjab and Delhi. He requested Haji Usman's family, his neighbours, to give him a copy of the poem but they did not oblige him.

Undeterred in his search he went to his cousins in village Dhugre where Wali Mohammad, the weaver, used to recite this poem.

He met Wali Mohammad who, in Mian Kamal's own words, said to him: "Have you looked at your face in the mirror? Men like you bring disrepute to their teachers.

"It rendered me speechless. I dragged myself into my cousins' house. My hosts asked me to recite the epic of Muzzafar Khan in the evening. I got on with my recitation.

Wali Mohammad after saying his night prayer in the mosque was on his way back home. While crossing the street he heard my voice. He came in and sat down. The moment I finished, he stood up and embraced me.

‘I was mistaken. You appeared to be a simpleton. I thought how such a person could be capable of learning?’ Wali Mohammad explained. He taught me how to recite Nijabat’s epic.”

Poetry is one aspect of his art. The other is storytelling. Both go together in his breathtaking composite narrative, painting a surreal canvas inspired by an unusual but real world where kings blunder, heroes stumble and peasants humble their lords to retain their human dignity.

Mian Kamal Din: unusual narrative of Punjab – Part-II

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Published 2014-01-31 07:43:06 in Dail Dawn Lahore

Mian Kamal as a person was a true son of soil but as an artist had a universal vision born of different and conflicting strands of historical experiences that made Punjab what it is; highly diverse and pluralistic.

He was a product of our indigenous tradition spanning over thousands of years that honed the art of storytelling, raising it to a level of complex and sophisticated literary genre. Punjab’s storytelling on the one hand preserved the people’s history ignored by myopic historians and on the other explored the significant events of the community, highlighting the conflicts and the contradictions that constantly created stirrings beneath the still waters of an apparently little changing socio- political life.

Mian Kamal stands distinguished among his peers in terms of choice of subject and nuanced expression, adding a whole new dimension to the oral transmission of creative experience. His repertoire is huge and varied reflecting his unmatched versatility, a hallmark of a profound mind engaged in discovering the breadth and length of human predicament. Just to have a measure of his imaginative sweep it suffices to point out that he can talk of Aristotle and Alexander, Darius and Iranian princesses, Raja Porus and Raja Ambhi, Raja Ram Chandra and Ashoka, Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb, Ranjit Singh and Hari Singh Nalwa, Buddhist monks and Hindu ascetics, Muslim saints and scholars, tribal lords and peasants of his native land. He knows the disposition a rustic as much as he knows the manners of a royal. He can discover a bold hero in a petite rustler and a sloughing coward in a formidable lord. He, with his unique insight, debunks the stereotyped images of Punjab’s peasant and lord (Rath). His peasant can be defiant to a point of being a self-destructive anarchist and his lord can be generous to fault. Some of the powerful themes in his stories emanate from his concept of valour, friendship, generosity,

fair play and sense of honour which his narrative raises to the level of supreme human values, never to be compromised.

One brief excerpt from his story 'Noora Sipra, Son of Kandar' will show you how valour, even if demonstrated by one's enemy, is honoured. "--- Bharwana people came marching against the Bhattis of town Ghoriwala. Bhattis came out to face them, firing their muskets. The raiders having no gun started retreating. Godha, the minion of Bhattis, positioned his musket and took aim. Ra Hashmat, the chief of the Bhattis, asked, 'who you are going to shoot at?' Godha replied: 'All of them are making a hasty retreat. Everybody is fleeing. But look, a man still stands his ground over there beside that tree. I will get him.' 'Don't fire,' shouted the chief. 'Why? 'Though I haven't seen him before but it must be Noor, son of Kandar. It's known, he is the one who can remain unruffled in the face of firing guns.' 'He has thrown us a challenge, I am going to fire at him,' Godha insisted. The chief ran and plucked the barrel.

He called the man over and said, 'Are you Maher Noor?' 'Yes Ra Hashmat, I am Noor.' 'You haven't seen me before. Who told you I am Hashmat?' 'You haven't seen me either. Who told you who am I?' said Noor. 'You are quoted as an example,' said Hashmat. 'You never show your back in battle.' 'You too are quoted as an example,' said Noor. 'It is said that Hashmat, the wise, fights battle with a sword in one hand and a hookah in the other.' 'Go back. We will not touch you,' said Hashmat. 'You go first; I will leave after you are gone. Otherwise it will be considered my retreat' replied Noor. 'Damn you. Where should I go? It's my place' replied Hashmat. 'The place where lords come face to face is anybody's place.

Look at those who are fleeing. Nobody considers, it's not their place. Yet everybody shouts, they are on the run. So you leave first. Otherwise I am going to stay here,' said Noor. At that moment Ra Hashmat, taking his turban off, threw it towards Noor. 'Throw your headgear towards me'. Thus they exchanged turbans. 'Now come and have a night stay with us. You may leave tomorrow' requested Hashmat. 'No' answered Noor. 'When women-folk of your town see me, they would gossip; ah, you have taken me prisoner. Not today, I will drop in some other time.'

Besides his highly evocative narrative tautened by the drag of human passion what stands out as an unmatched artistic achievement is his creation of incredibly credible characters which embody irresistible lust of life expressing in acts that belong in other dimension. His men and women while being realistic seize certain critical moments in their lives and make choices that transform them from ordinary into extraordinary, making the mortal immortal in the realm of imagination. Life is a high stake game. It offers little to those who are obsessed with the sense of loss and gain in an unending effort to maintain what can be described as normality which is in fact a form of social insanity. Mian Kamal's character, inspired by élan vital or sublime insanity born of human ideals, can become a pauper through its magnanimous act of generosity, can have an unusual courage to seek advice from his wise enemy and can die on the battle ground to retain his honour untainted. Hear him if you want to know what the patricians and the plebeians of his native land have been capable of. His is the voice of the soil; the voice that has the reverberations of an undying song accompanied by rumbling of time.